Homes are castles on nature's frontier

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Body

Citrus County has enticed thousands of people to relocate here in recent decades. Some like the outdoors the Nature Coast has to offer. The clear waters, established golf courses and preserved forest make a perfect combination.

Others like the small-town feel that's not too far from bustling metropolises but is far enough.
EDGE

Then there are those wanting to leave the world behind to create their own. Civilization hasn't fulfilled their needs and they are willing to sacrifice the conveniences of modern times for some peacefulness, a sunset and sometimes even a rattlesnake.

They live on the edge in Citrus County.

But they haven't fallen off.

Paul Sullivan's heaven has no roads, no cable television, few neighbors and lots of wildlife. He found everything he was looking for in a remote, swampy peninsula 3 miles east of Floral City.

The retired utility worker, certified genius and "medievalist" is spending his time pretty much alone, working each day on a personalized, 2,100-square-foot "castle" when he is not pursuing other interests, which include almost everything.

Sullivan has chosen a home for himself that many others would not. He has the solitude to work and closeness to nature he appreciates. And he has the freedom to do it his way.

The 61-year-old calls the house he is building and the projects that will follow - a barn, wildlife sanctuary and large garden - his "ultimate creation."

"I'll be working the rest of my life," Sullivan said. "I'm taking a piece of raw land and making it a home."

Sullivan also is interested in making a home for the land's original dwellers that came long before him. Soon after moving in, he purchased 14 acres of wetlands to the west of his home and calls it his "Enchanted Forest."

Sullivan walks the small path there every morning knowing that the sanctuary, named after a former property owner, is a habitat for unknown numbers of birds and other animals.

Some of the animals have even made their presence known.

Homes are castles on nature's frontier

A 2-foot alligator showed up one day in Sullivan's kitchen looking for food and hung around for a couple of days. Wild turkey kick up the dust when roosting in the back yard. Families of deer quietly shuffle across the back trails on his property in the early morning.

And sounding more like a tall tale out of folklore, Sullivan said that when a friend cleared off the land for his house, a rattlesnake was big enough and tough enough to jam the rotating blades of a tractor.

Those are the situations that make early retirement worth it to Sullivan. He left a job at a Boston power company in 1982 for a $ 60-a-week pension because he wanted to enjoy life before it ran out.

After the opening of a landfill nearby threatened his home in Brooksville, Sullivan found a deal on 7 acres outside Floral City and the urge to build a home that would suit his tastes and needs.

He moved a small trailer onto the practically untouched property and took to drawing plans.

Walking through the structure of the one-story house, Sullivan can describe every detail of the home he envisions: An empty closet in the living room is going to be a coffee and liquor bar; the courtyard, covered in wood chips, will be a 30-foot swimming pool.

He has invested about $ 40,000 in the home so far but figures he has saved nearly three times that much because he hasn't doled out much money for outside labor.

"I thought I had a little piece of heaven in Brooksville," Sullivan said. "But I guess the landfill was a blessing in disguise."

After hammering or cutting for most of the day, Sullivan spends the late afternoons writing letters to friends and an occasional piece for a Mensa newsletter. For 15 years, he has belonged to the international group that recognizes people with genius-level IQs.

He also has set aside extra space in the garage to accommodate his main hobby: arts and crafts. He dabbles in almost everything from woodwork to painting.

Sullivan is looking forward to using some of that talent once he gets past the backbreaking parts of home building and the decorating starts. Sullivan calls it the artistic steps in the process. "The only thing I had in Boston and Brooksville was more leisure time," he said. "But this is a labor of love."

Sullivan has one road to his house. But for F. A. Tucker and Chris Collett, that's too many.

The married couple are the only full-time residents down the Homosassa River, living on an island where the neighbors are wild and the front yard is wet.

"It takes a different kind of person to live out here," Tucker said. "We're that kind of people."

The couple call home a tin-roofed, A-frame house on Hellgate Island. But despite being 3 1/2 miles from shore, they haven't given up all of life's conveniences.

Electricity and telephone service have been available for Tucker since the Crow's Nest restaurant asked that lines be run out there in 1963.

The couple's home also has a computer, fax machine, security system and satellite dish. They even have a reverse osmosis machine to convert the river water, and saltwater when necessary, to drinking water.

Tucker, a Florida Highway Patrol veteran, has owned the property for 30 years, swapping pavement for water every vacation and most weekends. But after retirement in 1983, Tucker made Hellgate Island his permanent residence.

The 58-year-old picked up small jobs along the river as a fishing guide and boat runner from the mainland to the Crow's Nest, 3 miles beyond his house.

On one of those trips he met Collett, who was working at the Crow's Nest, and the two tied the knot in 1987.

Having grown up in a rural part of the Colorado mountains, Collett, 39, was used to not having civilization nearby. Living on an island seemed appropriate, although she kids Tucker that the fishing was too good to pass up.

And after the two gave up managing the Crow's Nest earlier this year, pretty much all that is left to do is play. They have so much fun enjoying island life that they don't want to come ashore unless they have to.

"The words "flea market' and "mall' just aren't in our vocabulary," Tucker said.

But Tucker and Collett say they have heard the word "Help" a few too many times.

Comfortably snuggled in chairs on their deck, the couple spends weekends tallying the number of boaters who will hit bottom while trying to navigate through the shallow channels in the river out front. Tucker said at least 30 boats on a busy day will run aground.

"It's not supposed to be funny," Tucker said. "But it's too amusing watching it happen over and over again."

Graphic

BLACK AND WHITE PHOTO; Paul Sullivan

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